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ICEWORLD
by Hal Clement



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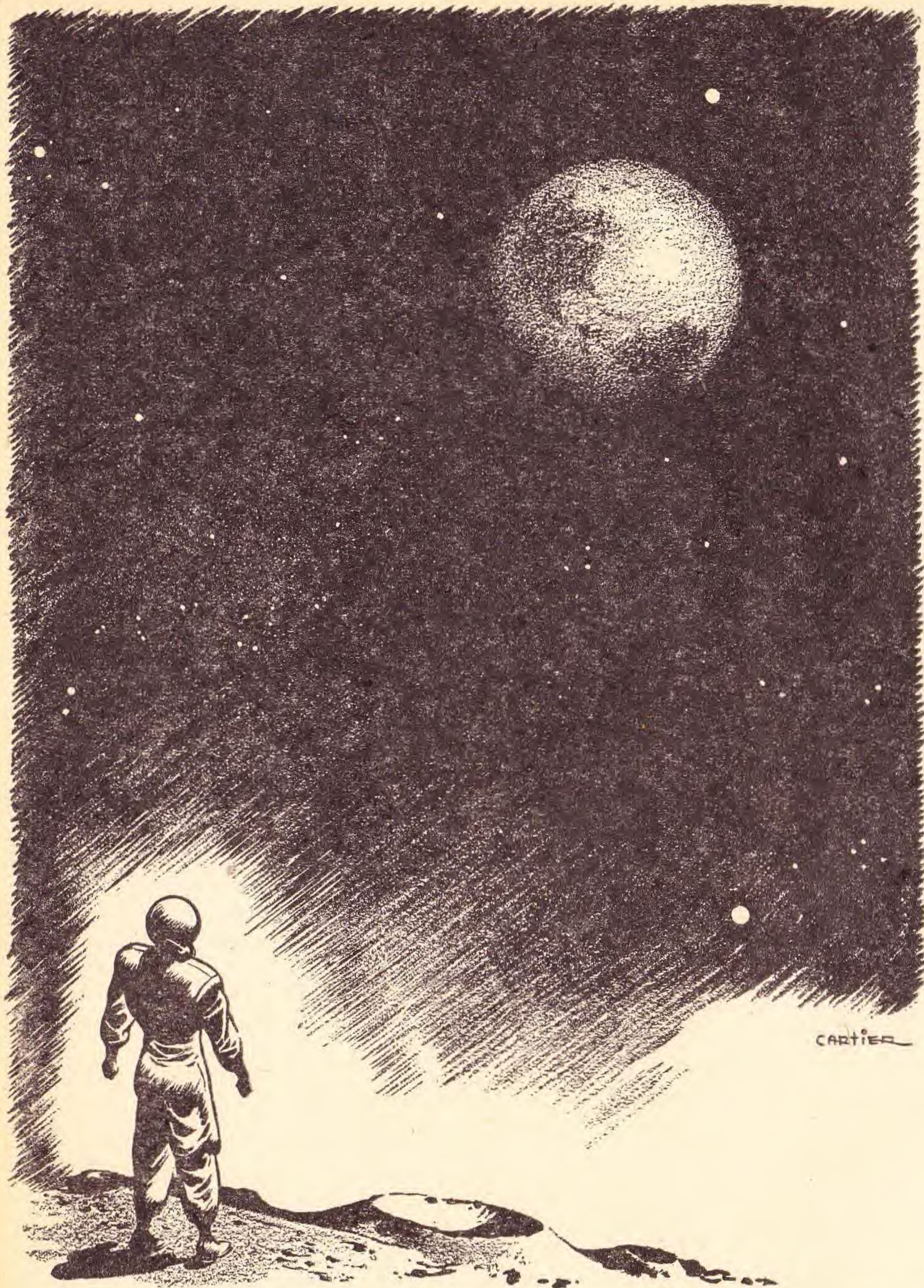
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"THE YEARS DRAW NIGH"

BY LESTER del REY

Ever felt a keen disappointment when you're set to go to a much desired place—and find there is no place to go after all. . . ?

Illustrated by Cartier

Mars was harsh and old, worn with the footsteps of two races that had come and gone, leaving only scant traces behind. Even the wind was tired, and its thin wailing was a monotonous mutter of memories from its eroded past.

Zeke Lerner stared out from the dust-covered observation port of the hastily reconditioned little rocket, across the scarred runways and sand-filled pits for the starships, toward the ruins of what had once been the great Star Station. His face was gray and dull as he watched a figure coming across the pitted sand of the field toward his ship.

He sighed softly, a faint sound in the tiny cabin, and his breath stirred the dust that lay everywhere. In four centuries, a man can learn not to think, but feelings and emotions survive. He was tired beyond any power of the rejuvenation treatments to remedy. His shoulders sagged slightly, confirming the age that the

gray in his hair implied. But his eyes were older still as he swung about to open the inner lock of the ship.

Stendal was a middle-aged man, but some of the same age and fatigue lay on his face when he dropped his aspirator helmet and slumped limply into a seat, and his plain uniform as Assistant Co-ordinator of Terra was covered with dirt and grime. He grinned faintly at Zeke and pulled a thermo of coffee out of its niche.

"So the *Thirty-four* is coming back?" Zeke asked quietly.

He had no need of the other's nod, though. When they'd finally located him at the Rejuvenation Center and rushed him to the rocket field, he'd suspected. Only a matter of extreme urgency could interrupt a man's return to youth. The messengers had been uninformative, but he had been sure, once they told him Stendal was waiting on Mars. They must have been keeping it re-

stricted to the top administrators. Zeke's eyes went back to the dirt on the man's uniform.

"Top secret," Stendal confirmed. "So hush-hush that I came to do the janitor work here. Now it's all yours. The robots and I managed to get it into a reasonable facsimile of repaired condition. *Oof!* I could use a week's sleep, but I've got to get back Earthside at once. Sorry to interrupt the rejuvenation, Zeke."

Zeke shrugged. Once, when the rejuvenation was new and men stood in line for days to keep their appointment, it might have mattered. Now there'd be a cancellation he could replace. Over fifteen per cent of the population was refusing treatment—and some of the canceling men were ones only reaching their first touch of age. Each year, less of the population seemed to find life worth renewing.

"How'd you find out she was coming?" he asked. "After all, she's fifty years overdue."

Stendal tossed the thermo into a disposal chute and reached for one of Zeke's cigarettes. "Centaurus' automatic signal must still be working. Nigel, at the Bureau, got a series of pips showing something coming this way faster than light. That's the only ship we have out, so it must be her, or—"

He let it hang unfinished, but Zeke knew what he was thinking. It was either the *Thirty-four* or another race coming with a ship that could exceed light speed. Sudden adrenalin shot through him, and he

straightened. After all, the ship was long overdue. He wished the ship and the men no ill, but—

"No use getting up false hopes," Stendal cut into his thoughts. "The captain was a pretty determined sort, as I remember him. Maybe he had trouble. And I'll have trouble if I don't get back. I'll leave you a robot, in case anything needs more repairs. Think you can still run this setup, Zeke?"

Zeke snorted. He'd spent time enough at Marsport, first as head of communications, and finally as director of the whole Star Ship project, while they built the great ships and sent them out as fast as they could come off the ways. Forty ships during half a century, each costing over four billion dollars. And the *Thirty-four* was the last one out. All the rest had come back to report failure in this final quest for new frontiers.

They buckled on their aspirator helmets and went out through the locks. Stendal waved curtly and headed toward his own rocket, calling three of the waiting robots with him and sending the fourth toward the broken ruin of the administration building. Zeke watched Stendal's rocket take off and disappear. Then he turned for a final look over the wrecked field.

Mars was already wiping out all traces of this second race that had come boiling out from Earth, bent for the stars. Marsport had been young and booming when Zeke had

come there first, three and a half centuries ago. Two centuries later, when the starships first began to come straggling back, and they shifted him to Earth to head General Traffic, the sand was just starting to creep over the outer buildings.

Those structures were gone now, vanished into the desert, with only this single building maintained after a fashion in faint hope the last ship would return. The frame shacks and hydroponic quonsets that had hidden the ancient Martian ruins were rotted long before; there was only the hint of a foundation here and there to show they had ever existed. In a century or so there would be no evidence that Mars had ever felt the marching feet of men, except for the scraps of the returned ships that might last a few millennia longer.

Zeke sighed again, and headed toward the building.

Then his eyes went to the horizon, where the piled stones and pitted pylon of beryl steel still stood, marking what had been the unknown and apparently unknowable race of Mars, dead perhaps ten million years before. Once that race must have spread its structures across the whole planet, but now there were only such traces as this, useless to even the archaeologists. All the elaborate designs on them might have held significance once, but no man would ever decode them. There was no hint as to their nature, or where the race had vanished—or

why.

He entered the lock of the building, with the robot dutifully at his heels, and surveyed it glumly. Only the one room, housing the great space-destroying ultrawave communicators, had been put in order. But most of the sand and dust was gone, and it was livable enough for a while. He checked to see that the communicator was working before walking over to the single window and staring out at the Martian ruins again.

Beside him, the robot stirred uneasily. "Orders?" it questioned.

Zeke turned back reluctantly from the window. "No orders, Ozin. We're on Mars, where men have given up dominion. You're as free as I am. Do what you like."

Ozin stirred again, worn metal protesting at its lack of usefulness, its queer, almost intelligent mind trying to resolve the problem presented by Zeke's words. But even this final robot, the last model before men abandoned the idea of robots, could not handle that.

"Orders?" it repeated.

Zeke gave up. "Take my ship up and house it behind the building, out of the way, then. After that, you can cut off until I call you."

The robot wasted no words in acknowledgment, but turned slowly and headed out, its metal body clumping along as woodenly as Zeke's mind was working. The lock hissed softly, and a trace of the stale, dessicated air of Mars came in.

Then Ozin appeared around the arc of the wall, heading toward the rocket. Zeke watched it enter, saw the shiplock close, and shut his eyes at the deep blue flame of the exhaust from the unbaffled tubes.

Sand kicked up, spurting out and grating against the walls of the station wing, swishing against the pylon of the lost Martians. For a minute, dust hung in the air. But it settled back quickly now, to show an unchanged scene. Zeke heard the ship land again behind the building.

He reached automatically for a cigarette, wondering idly if the repaired building aspirators would take even that much added load in their labor of making a decent atmosphere out of Mars' thin air. For a second, he fiddled with the ultra-wave set. The signal was coming through from Earth, indicating that they were already quietly beaming it out to where the *Thirty-four* could pick it up. It was the same dull, insipid news Zeke had heard for too many decades, though it might be interesting to men who had been gone from Earth for over two centuries. There was no other signal to indicate that they were within calling distance, however.

He went to the window again, to watch the slow sinking of the sun that was reddening a distant sand-storm, until it finally crept below the horizon. With an abruptness that was typical of the planet, darkness fell. The stars seemed to leap into the sky, with Earth standing

out among them. He frowned at that, realizing that he was the only man who would be seeing it. All the others were home on the planet.

The skylight was filthy, but he found a battered bench that would stand his weight and began working the dust and grime from the glass. The stars were clearer through that. A few hundred years hadn't changed them noticeably, and he picked them out—hot points that barely flickered in the thin air of Mars. Jupiter was in view, and he knew where all the other useless planets should be, though he could not see them.

He grimaced faintly at that, remembering his life as a boy when men had dreamed that each new world might contain some rare treasure—or even intelligence to meet and compete with man. None had panned out, though. Mercury was too hot, Venus was a roiling dustbowl under foul, poisonous layers of atmosphere, Mars worn beyond usefulness, and the other planets too cold and forbidding, except as possible stepping stones to the stars that lay farther out.

Chenery had found the trick to beat light speed when Zeke was still a callow thirty, and Marsport had sprung into life; the planet had made an ideal take-off point for ships which Earth could not permit in her own atmosphere because of the dangerous radiation of their exhausts.

There'd been Centaurus and Sirius, and the thousands of suns be-

yond, some with planets and some without. There had even been the high moment when a planet had been found and colonized, a mere thousand light-years away, before men had discovered that something in the star's radiation was eventually lethal to all Earth forms. But there had been no life beyond the Solar System—and nothing that even the most foolhardy could use as a reason for man's settlement.

It had proven to be a barren universe, except for Earth and the Mars of perhaps ten million years ago. Zeke looked at the ruins again, still faintly visible in the light that sliced out from his window. Whatever had built them had reached a civilization at least as high as man's. What had happened to them that had made a culture capable of such work come to a sudden and unmarked end?

A meaningless crackle came from the ultrawave set, and he moved to it, touching up its sensitivity. For a moment again, he hoped that it would respond with only gibberish that might mean another race coming down the long starlanes toward Earth, instead of the code he knew. But he choked off the wish, even before the speaker burped again. There was a sudden sound of code symbols a second later, followed by the thin, wavering words and voice at the limit of reception.

"Star-Ship *Thirty-four* coming in. Can you get us? *Thirty-four* calling Marsport. Landing in two hours

maximum. Clear field for full splash landing. Clear field for landing without tube shields. *Thirty-four* calling Marsport—"

Zeke had the great bank of accumulators working through the transmitter, and the indicators showed that the big tubes were ready to throw their pulsed megawatts into subspace. He glanced at the bandpass and saw that it was at its maximum intelligibility level for the distance.

"Land Marsport, *Thirty-four*, as you will. All clear. Repeat."

The voice came back, weaker. It wavered, broke into a squeal, and disappeared in a hash of static. Only blind luck had given them clear subspace long enough for a complete call. Zeke cut off the transmitter; there was no purpose in telling them that the field had been clear for decades. They'd find that soon enough.

Mars had still been a colony when they took off. It had remained one while six more of the great ships were built and sent out with orders to proceed to the limit of range before returning—or to return on significant discovery. Zeke had watched them all leave, filled with bright young volunteers, sure that they would be the ones to find a new race of intelligent life or a world that would be a paradise for men. Now the last one out was returning, and it was appropriate that he should meet the space-weary men who were coming home.

He tried to remember them, but

there had been too many years and too many ships. On impulse, he knocked dust from the walls, scanning the names that had been scrawled there against regulations—and left because he had countermanded those regulations. Surprisingly, he found the one he was seeking. Hugh Miffen, captain of the *Thirty-four*. Zeke remembered him now, a tow-headed boy with a ramrod back and the driving urge of divine inspiration in his eyes. And there had been “Preacher” Hook, who swore he was going to memorize the whole Bible in subspace. Only the two stood out now, over the long years.

Surely, if any group could have found a home for man or a companion intelligence, that group should have done it. *Something* must have happened during the fifty years they had been overdue. Their fuel would never have lasted, otherwise.

The speaker gobbled at him, finally, until he cut the power down. The wash of static could only mean that they were beginning the struggle out of subspace, knocking a hole for themselves in normal space and crawling painfully into it. It was taking the ship longer than it should, and Zeke began to worry. Then the blare of static decreased. He knew she was down under light speed.

The ship robot took his call this time, indicating that all the men aboard were fully occupied in the

task of trimming her for normal flight. The signal was clear, however, and he could hear faint sounds of men’s voices in the background. There was no undue worry in them, as best he could tell.

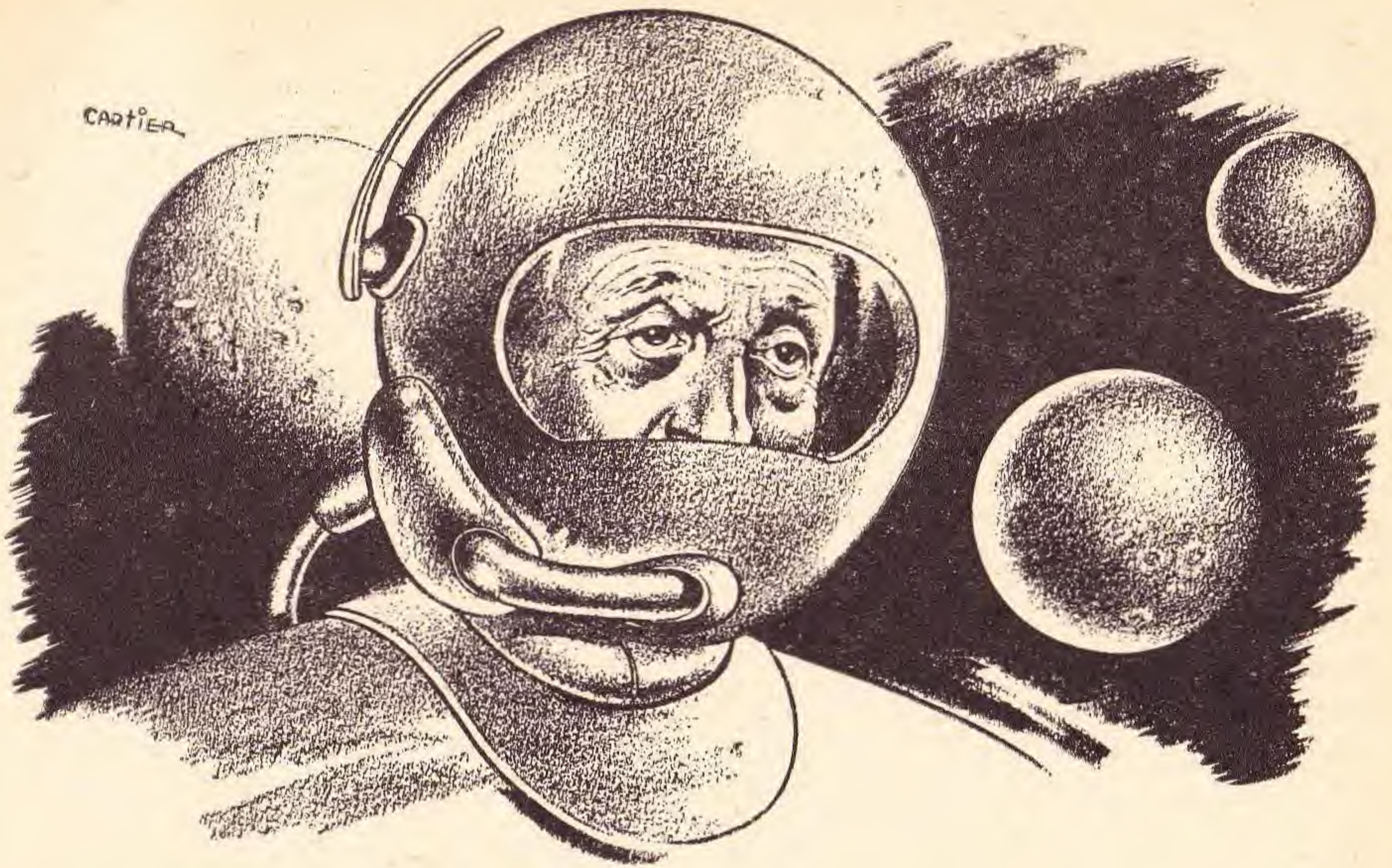
“Sealed beam,” Zeke requested. It took more power to maintain a signal that could be handled on a beam with the ultrawave, but she was close enough now to risk it; it wouldn’t do to have the message accidentally picked up by Earth until he knew what the results of the trip were. The robot acknowledged his order, and the queer, clipped effect of the sealing could be detected on the signal.

Zeke grunted with satisfaction as he made his own adjustment. “O.K., this is Zeke Lerner, code responsibility 21-zy-18-obt-4-a. You can report.”

“Digest of report,” the robot began tonelessly. “Visited suns, 3248; examined planets, 2751. Checked suns on automatic spotting, 9472; checked planets and found barren on automatic spotting, 23,911. Maximum distance attained by direct route, one hundred ten thousand light-years, forty-three ship-years; arc of coverage—”

“Cut it out. Did you find inhabited worlds?”

The robot adjusted to the interruption slowly, humming into the microphone as evidence that it was still there. Zeke swore. Then a human voice suddenly took over, weary even through the distortion of the sealed beam.



"Lerner? You still on the spot?" It was a deep bass voice that could only belong to Hugh Miffen, in spite of the years that had roughened it. The ship had naturally carried rejuvenation equipment, but even the best treatment never wiped out all traces of time. "Sorry we had the robot on—it's about half shot, now. Anyhow, we're under light, and I'm free for a minute. Leaving out the statistics, we ran out too far and got short of fuel. We'd spotted two planets that might barely be habitable, so we backtracked and put down on one of them. It took us about thirty-five years to find and work fuel out of the ores. Then we went on a bit before we turned home."

Zeke's eyebrows had shot up, and

he shook his head. He tried to picture what it would be like on some barely livable planet, scouting for ore, jury-rigging some kind of plant to refine it—with almost no equipment—and his old respect for Miffen went up another notch. That type of man seemed sadly lacking nowadays. But he made no comment on it; it could wait for more important things, and Miffen had begun to describe the two planets.

One was too far from its sun in an eccentric orbit, going from a brief summer into a bitter winter equal to three years of Earth time. It was suitable otherwise, but no more so than Antarctica. The other was a waste land of little water and low air pressure, though barely habitable. It had been on that world that

Miffen and his crew had stranded themselves. Zeke frowned as he discarded the planets. Both would mean tremendous difficulties in ferrying supplies out for at least a century until they could somehow be made self-supporting. Men would work for a dream, but there were limits. It would need more incentive than there seemed to be.

"Evidence of life anywhere?" he asked reluctantly, as the other finished. But the question had to be asked, although the answer could be predicted, almost certainly. Even over that distance, the possibility of other races to study might drive the scientists to set up an outpost, and with that as a basis, another world might be developed as a stepping stone to still further exploration.

Miffen's voice was hesitant as the answer came. "The world we were on—Outpost, we called it—had some ruins that could only come from intelligence. But there was nothing living there. Maybe it had been what we called it once—Damn!"

A yell had sounded thinly over the speaker. Miffen's steps clattered loudly, to fade out, and leave the ultrawave dead. With the ship braking down for a landing, there was probably more than enough work for all the men. Zeke's hand lingered over the switch. Finally, he depressed it, cutting off power.

Ruins that showed intelligence, eighty million light-years across the galaxy! In forty thousand explored

worlds the starships had touched, this was the first sign of even that much chance. It wasn't enough, of course, but—

Slowly Zeke's shoulders straightened and his figure came erect. They'd explored space to a distance of a hundred million light-years on a bare chance, without any reason to hope. Out of all the previous reports, there had been only three habitable worlds, and no sign of life beyond the Solar System. Now a ship was returning with reports of two barely possible worlds and evidence that there was such life! An outpost—and somewhere beyond, perhaps, the planet where that life still existed.

With proper propaganda, with enough build-up, and with evidence that somewhere in the infinity of stars life and livability must exist, could man refuse to go on with his questing?

For a moment, he clutched at the hope. It had to be. One world was not enough for a race that had set its heart on the stars, had always found frontiers, and had geared its soul to an eternal drive toward something beyond. It could not be cooped up and fenced in without sickening in its own futility, as it was sickening even now—as he was sick within himself after four centuries of following blind alleys.

With only a little spark to fan the flames, men might be driven on. And perhaps only a few light-years away from the end of their explorations—the arbitrary limits imposed

by time and energy for the ships—there might be fellow races to stir the spark that was dying in mankind.

Then he grinned bitterly and looked out through the window, turning the single workable searchlight on the Martian ruins. Man had found evidence of other life in his own backyard, and it had carried him for centuries. But it was not enough to drive him onward forever. There was nothing on Outpost that couldn't be had here—and no colony had lasted on Mars.

Zeke squinted his eyes as he studied the pylon again, noting the queer, twisted decorations on it. He had seen the report of the scientists, and they had finally given up the riddle. It would take more than this to drive men further outwards. And Miffen's voice had sounded too doubtful.

But some of the hope remained faintly in him as he stood staring into the Martian night. It would have to wait until he heard more. Now it was only another mystery, like that of the lost race of Mars.

What had happened to them? They had known how to cast tungsten, and there was evidence that nuclear reactions had been used in tempering the pylons. That was high level science. Where had it gone? There had apparently been no long period of high civilization, since the pylons all over the planet were about alike, with few advances in the later ones. There hadn't been time enough for the race to become

decadent. Nor was there any evidences of war carried on by a race with advanced nuclear physics; there would have been enough signs of that. They couldn't have settled Earth, of course—it wouldn't have been suitable. But they must have had starships. What had kept them from spreading outwards—had even wasted them into nothingness in such a brief period of culture on their own planet?

His thoughts were interrupted by a *beep* from the speaker, and he switched on the automatic ultra-wave beacons that would guide the ship down. Overhead, a thin whine thickened to a stuttering cough, the unhealthy sound of gasping, unshielded rockets that had been used too often and in too many futile landings. It was coming down well enough, though, half a mile away. Zeke watched it land while he was climbing into antiradiation armor.

The ground was still smoking, but the counter showed the radiation low enough for a quick passage when he went out. He waited for the outer lock to open, then made a dash toward it, his breath reminding him that he was old and had not been rejuvenated. He crawled into the lock and stopped to catch himself before removing the armor, while the inner lock began to open.

Then he was facing four gaunt, weary men. His eyes darted back for the others of the thirty who had gone out, but Miffen was shaking his gray-bearded head. "Four of us,

general. We had a few casualties. But—”

His arm swept out toward the field, now illuminated by the beams of the great ship, and his eyes fixed on the scene of the sand-filled pits and bits of building foundations that showed through the quartz of the entrance port.

Zeke shrugged and reached for his cigarettes. The sudden hunger in their eyes hit him, then, reminding him of stores now depleted in all those long years. He passed the package around, careful not to notice the hands that shook as they pulled out the cylinders.

“We’ve had some casualties, too, you might say,” he told Miffen. He lighted his own cigarette finally, and his shoulders lifted and dropped at the other’s expression. “And I’m not a general now—not since Marsport was abandoned. I came out only because we were expecting you back. What about Outpost?”

“In my cabin I’ve got it on micro-film.” Miffen swung about, waving the three crewmen off. For the first time, Zeke noticed that one of them had the flaming red hair that had always distinguished Preacher Hook.

He lifted an eyebrow and Hook nodded, pulling out a worn Bible and making a circle with his thumb and finger. “All memorized,” he stated. But the grin on his face was uncertain, and the achievement no longer seemed to be important to him.

Zeke had forgotten the size of

these starships as they went up the handrails. The elevators were obviously not working. Miffen swung up the last and turned into a little cabin, kicking the door farther open. He dug into a worn chest and came out with a small package and a little viewer.

“I figured some things from what we picked up of Earth’s broadcast,” he remarked emotionlessly as he threaded the film into the viewer. “But I didn’t believe it. Not until I saw Marsport. I guess . . . Well, this will give you an idea of Outpost. I explored all the suns around I could reach, but I never learned where the race originated.”

Zeke adjusted the lenses carefully, seeing the unfamiliar two-dimensional flatness of non-stereo for the first time in centuries. It was awkward at first, but his eyes soon relearned the trick of fooling themselves.

There were several scenes, showing a sky of dull green, with grayish sand and something that looked like jumbled blocks of granite. As he stared, a pattern began to show itself. Something had been built there once, and by intelligence. Closer viewing showed that the stones had been shaped geometrically, under all their weathering.

He came to a list of statistics and skimmed through it. Then he reached the final scene.

Miffen’s voice suddenly sounded behind him, awkward and too tense. “What about the other ships?”

“They all got back—they’re piled

up beside the field, beyond the reach of your lights. No use to us now. Thirty-nine hulks, and yours makes the fortieth—all we ever built." He turned back to the film, but again Miffen's voice interrupted him.

"All? I'd expect it—That bad, eh?"

"Worse. I suppose you're entitled to know what you've come back to. You'll see it soon enough, though—and better than I can tell you." Zeke clamped the viewer to his eye firmly, and turned to the light once more. "There was purpose when you left. Now that's all past tense."

"Yeah." Miffen let the word hang. He must have seen Zeke's sudden tenseness and realized there was no use putting off the inspection of the final scene on the film any longer. Zeke was still staring at it, but he was unconscious of what his eyes saw, and the last of the hope in him was draining slowly away.

He stared up at Miffen, tapping the viewer. "You know what this is, of course. Or do you?"

Miffen shook his head. "I suspected. But I never paid much attention back here, and it's been a long time. I kept hoping I was crazy."

Zeke made no answer. He picked up the viewer and headed toward the control room, with Miffen following. Still silent, he pointed out through the viewports, across the leprous surface of Mars, toward the pitted beryl steel pylon that

gleamed in the light from the Star Station. Then he put the viewer to his eyes again.

The sky was green instead of black, and the sand was gray where Mars was covered with red. But the scene was the same. A gleaming metal pylon rose from the rubble of ruined blocks, carrying the queer, twisted decorations that had been typical of all Martian structures. There was no question about what race had tried to colonize Outpost—and had failed.

Suddenly a work-gnarled hand took the viewer from him, and he turned to see Preacher Hook and the other men. They must have followed Miffen and himself into the control room. But it didn't matter. They must have suspected. And there was no surprise on their faces as they passed the viewer from one to another, comparing the scene with that outside.

Almost without feeling, Zeke picked up the ultrawave microphone and called the administration building, ordering the robot to bring his rocket down beside the big starship. He adjusted the dials carefully and spoke terse, coded symbols into the instrument. A moment later, Stendal's voice answered him.

"I'm bringing the four survivors down in my ship," he reported in a voice that seemed completely detached from him. "Give us a secrecy blanket until we can report in full. And see if you can fill a few bathtubs with whisky. We'll need it."

Stendal seemed to catch his

breath and then sigh, but his words were level when he spoke. "So Pandora's box was just a fairy story, after all. Well, I never had many hopes. O.K., I'll get the liquor, Zeke. And about your rejuvenation—I'm getting a private installation here for you. If the others need it, we'll take care of all of you."

Zeke looked up at the four men, and then out toward the pylon again—all that was left of a race that had searched the stars in its need to find new frontiers. It must have been a hardy race, since it had dared to set up a colony across all those innumerable parsecs of space, without even the inspiration of other life. Then, when that colony had failed, the race had returned to the loneliness of its own little world, where the stars looked down grimly, no longer promising anything. Now Mars had been dead ten million years, and the pylon stood as the final tombstone on the world which had become a prison. The old puzzle of that race's end was solved.

The speaker was sputtering with

Stendal's impatient questions, as Zeke and the men studied each other, but they gave no attention to it. Preacher Hook sighed, breaking the silence.

"*Man goeth to his long home,*" he quoted softly. "*And the mourners go about the streets; or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern; and the dust return to the earth as it was, and the spirit return unto God who gave it.*"

Zeke nodded and picked up the microphone.

"Just get the whisky. We've decided to skip the rejuvenation."

He put the microphone back on its hook carefully and headed toward the handrails that led down, with the others behind him. Ozin had the rocket waiting, and they climbed in and strapped themselves down.

Then the rockets blasted, and the last five men beyond the Earth were heading home.

THE END

* * * * *